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**Service Learning as a Pedagogical Tool for Social Change: A Study
of Student-Led Drug Abuse Prevention Initiatives in Vijayawada,
India**

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Abstract

Service learning integrates academic knowledge with community engagement, enabling students to address real-world social issues while fostering civic responsibility. This study explores the effectiveness of student-led service-learning initiatives in preventing drug abuse among children in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh. An empirical, field-based approach was adopted through visits to child care institutions, with Navajeevan Bala Bhavan serving as the primary study site. Data were collected through informal interactions, observation, and activity-based engagement. Student groups designed and implemented awareness programs focusing on drug risks, peer pressure, and health consequences. The findings revealed notable gaps in initial awareness; however, post-intervention observations indicated improved understanding and engagement among the children. The study concludes that student-led service-learning initiatives not only enhance community awareness but also promote experiential learning, empathy, and a sense of social responsibility among students.

Keywords: Service Learning, Student-Led Initiatives, Drug Abuse Prevention, Social Change

Introduction

Service learning has emerged as an effective pedagogical approach that integrates academic learning with meaningful community engagement. It enables students to apply classroom knowledge to real-life situations while fostering a sense of civic responsibility and social awareness. In recent years, educational institutions have increasingly adopted service-learning practices to address pressing social issues through student participation.

One such critical issue is substance abuse among adolescents, particularly those in vulnerable and institutional care settings. In urban areas like Vijayawada, children residing in care homes often face exposure to negative influences such as drug use, smoking, and alcohol consumption, which can severely affect their physical, emotional, and social well-being.

In this context, the present study focuses on a student-led service-learning initiative undertaken by II B.Com students of Maris Stella College. The students engaged with children at Navajeevan Bala Bhavan through regular field visits, aiming to create awareness about the harmful effects of substance abuse and to inspire positive life choices.

Through interactive sessions, peer discussions, games, and continuous engagement, the initiative sought not only to address drug abuse but also to instill hope, ambition, and a sense of purpose among the children. At the same time, the process enabled students to develop empathy, leadership skills, and a deeper understanding of societal challenges, thereby reinforcing the transformative potential of service learning as a pedagogical tool.

Problem Statement

Substance abuse among adolescents in vulnerable environments has become a growing social concern. Children residing in institutional care settings are often exposed to unhealthy habits such as drug consumption, smoking, and alcohol use at an early age. These behaviors not only affect

their health but also lead to a lack of motivation, reduced life aspirations, and emotional detachment.

During the preliminary field interactions at Navajeevan Bala Bhavan, it was observed that many children exhibited signs of low awareness regarding the consequences of substance abuse. Additionally, there was a noticeable lack of direction, ambition, and engagement with educational or career-oriented goals.

This situation highlighted the urgent need for intervention through awareness, motivation, and continuous engagement. However, conventional teaching methods may not be effective in addressing such deep-rooted behavioral and social issues. Therefore, a student-led service-learning approach was adopted to actively involve learners in creating social change while simultaneously enhancing their own educational experience.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the level of awareness regarding drug abuse among children in institutional care.
- To design and implement student-led awareness and intervention programs.
- To evaluate the impact of service-learning activities on the attitudes and behaviors of children.
- To examine the role of service learning in developing empathy, leadership, and social responsibility among students.
- To explore how experiential learning can contribute to meaningful social change.

Review of Literature

- Service learning has been widely recognized as an effective pedagogical approach that integrates academic instruction with community engagement. According to Robert G. Bringle and Julie A. Hatcher (1995), service learning enhances student learning by combining meaningful community service with reflection and academic content. It promotes active participation, critical thinking, and civic responsibility among students.
- The concept of experiential learning, as proposed by David A. Kolb (1984), emphasizes learning through direct experience, reflection, and application. Similarly, John Dewey

(1938) highlighted that education should be grounded in real-life experiences, enabling learners to connect theory with practice. In the context of service learning, such experiential engagement enhances both academic understanding and personal growth.

- Research on student engagement suggests that participation in community-based activities fosters empathy, leadership skills, and social awareness. Educational frameworks promoted by UNESCO (2017) also emphasize the role of education in developing socially responsible individuals capable of contributing to sustainable development.
- Furthermore, substance abuse among youth has been identified as a significant global concern. Reports by the World Health Organization (2020) highlight the importance of early awareness and preventive interventions in reducing risky behaviors among adolescents. Community-based and peer-led initiatives have been found to be effective in influencing attitudes and promoting healthier lifestyles.

Thus, existing literature supports the role of service learning as a transformative educational tool that benefits both students and the community.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and participatory research design, aligning with the principles of service learning. The initiative was carried out by II B.Com students of Maris Stella College as part of a semester-long academic program.

The study was conducted at Navajeevan Bala Bhavan, where students engaged with children aged 16 and above. A total of 22 students were divided into three groups to facilitate structured and consistent interaction. The program spanned approximately 180 hours, allowing for continuous engagement and follow-up.

Data collection was carried out through informal interactions, participant observation, and activity-based engagement. Students conducted regular visits, during which they interacted with children through awareness sessions, peer discussions, and recreational activities. Observations focused on participants' awareness levels, behavioral responses, engagement, and willingness to change.

In addition, students maintained reflection reports as part of their academic evaluation, which served as an important source of qualitative data. These reflections provided insights into both the children's responses and the students' learning experiences.

The data were analyzed using thematic interpretation, with particular emphasis on identifying patterns in awareness levels, behavioral changes, and the overall impact of the intervention. A comparative understanding of pre- and post-engagement responses was also considered to assess the effectiveness of the student-led initiatives.

Student-Led Service-Learning Intervention

A key feature of this study is the active involvement of students as facilitators of change rather than passive learners. The service-learning initiative was entirely student-driven, with faculty serving as a guide and mentor throughout the process.

The intervention began with students identifying substance abuse as a critical issue among children during initial field visits. Based on their observations, they collaboratively designed strategies to address the problem through awareness, motivation, and continuous engagement.

The students organized and conducted a series of structured and informal sessions during their weekly visits. These activities included awareness programs on the harmful effects of drugs, smoking, and alcohol consumption, along with discussions on peer pressure and its influence. To make the sessions more engaging and relatable, students incorporated peer discussions, games, and real-life storytelling.

Beyond awareness, the students focused on motivational aspects by emphasizing the importance of education, career opportunities, and goal setting. They attempted to instill a sense of purpose and direction among the children, encouraging them to envision a better future. Over the course of the program, the students informally created a supportive environment resembling a “mini rehabilitation” model through consistent interaction and emotional support.

The intervention followed a systematic process:

- Identification of the problem through field observation
- Direct interaction with children to understand their background and behavior
- Planning of awareness and engagement activities
- Implementation through regular visits
- Continuous observation and adaptation of strategies

- Reflection on outcomes and learning

This structured yet flexible approach ensured that the initiative remained responsive to the needs of the children while maintaining its educational objectives.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study are based on observations, interactions, and reflections recorded during the course of the service-learning program at Navajeevan Bala Bhavan.

During the initial phase of the visits, it was observed that many of the children exhibited low awareness regarding the harmful effects of substance abuse. Several participants were already engaged in habits such as smoking, alcohol consumption, and drug use, which had led to a lack of motivation, reduced emotional engagement, and limited interest in education or future planning.

However, consistent student-led interventions brought noticeable changes over time. Through regular awareness sessions, peer discussions, and motivational interactions, children gradually began to show increased interest in changing their lifestyle. A significant outcome of the program was that nearly ten children demonstrated a positive transformation in their attitudes and behavior. These children showed willingness to move away from harmful habits and expressed interest in education and career-oriented goals.

An important indicator of this transformation was reflected in the actions of the institution, where the caretakers assessed the progress of the children and facilitated their transition to the next phase of their lives. This progression highlights the tangible impact of the intervention and underscores the effectiveness of sustained engagement.

From the students' perspective, the experience proved to be deeply enriching. As their first field-based learning exposure, the initiative provided them with an opportunity to directly engage with real-world social issues. Students reported a sense of fulfillment, responsibility, and pride in being able to contribute to meaningful change. The reflective reports indicated that the experience enhanced their empathy, communication skills, and understanding of societal challenges.

Thus, the results demonstrate that student-led service-learning initiatives can create a dual impact of bringing about positive behavioral change in the community while simultaneously transforming students into socially responsible individuals.

The transformation of approximately ten children into more focused and goal-oriented individuals stands as a concrete outcome of the initiative.

Conclusion

The present study highlights the effectiveness of service learning as a pedagogical tool for fostering social change. The student-led initiative at Navajeevan Bala Bhavan demonstrates that meaningful engagement, consistent interaction, and empathetic communication can significantly influence the lives of vulnerable children.

The transformation observed among the participants, particularly those who showed a shift away from substance abuse and towards education and personal development, reflects the success of the intervention. At the same time, the initiative played a crucial role in shaping the students' perspectives, providing them with experiential learning that extends beyond the classroom.

This study reinforces the idea that service learning is not merely an academic exercise but a powerful approach to bridging the gap between education and societal needs. By empowering students to take active roles in addressing real-world problems, it contributes to the development of responsible citizens capable of driving positive change.

References

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Appendix

Supplementary materials related to the study, including photographs of field visits, student reflection reports, and activity documentation, are available at: [Service Learning – Drug Abuse Prevention - Field visits](#)